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ABSTRACT

An on-going study of the performance of high-poverty schools in Texas is revealing entire school districts where such schools are achieving high academic results. Instead of isolated pockets of excellence, a few large and medium-sized districts have been identified in which a cluster of high-poverty schools is achieving at the top levels of the state's accountability system. During 1997-98, 10 Texas districts were studied in which between one-third and all of the high-poverty schools achieved a "recognized" or "exemplary" rating in the accountability system, based on standardized test scores, student attendance, and school dropout rates. Five of the districts studied were in south Texas near the Mexican border and had high overall rates of poverty and limited English proficiency. Interviews and observations in the 10 districts showed that success-breeding environments were created through the careful, diligent, and passionate efforts of superintendents, school boards, and central office leaders. First, superintendents and other district leaders created in their communities a sense of urgency for the improvement of academic achievement. Secondly, district leaders created an environment in which improving academic instruction became a responsibility shared by everyone at every school. Finally, district leaders recognized that high expectations needed high quality support and changed the role of the central office to focus on creating various support structures. (SV)

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Urgency, Responsibility, Efficacy:

Preliminary Findings of A Study of High-Performing Texas School Districts

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Amarillo ISD, Mr. Bob Moore, Superintendent

Beaumont ISD, Dr. Carrol Thomas, Jr., Superintendent

Brazosport ISD, Dr. Gerald E. Anderson, Superintendent

Houston ISD, Dr. Rod Paige, General Superintendent
Mr. Erasmo Teran, North Houston District Superintendent
Dr. Charles Hebert, Northeast Houston District Superintendent

Laredo ISD, Mrs. Graciela C. Ramirez, Superintendent

Los Fresnos Cons. ISD, Dr. Eliseo Ruiz, Jr., Superintendent

Mission Cons. ISD, Mr. Lupe A. Gonzalez, Superintendent

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, Mr. William C. Morgan, Superintendent

Weslaco ISD, Mr. Richard Rivera, Superintendent

Ysleta ISD, Mr. Anthony J. Trujillo, Superintendent

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Background

Educational literature has many stories of heroic schools that have achieved impressive results against formidable odds (Brooks, Jones, & Noiel, 1996; Lein, Johnson, Ragland, 1996; Reyes & Scribner, 1996). These schools, located in communities challenged by poverty, violence, and other social ills, have achieved academic results that far exceed public stereotypes or general expectations of high-poverty schools. These schools have challenged the conventional wisdom about what is possible in schools with high percentages of African American and Hispanic children. They have inspired both the awe and envy of other educators, as they achieve what others have not dared to dream possible. However, these stories have almost always been accounts of individual schools. Typically, these are the stories of mavericks: schools that have achieved success, without substantial support from, and sometimes, in spite of, their district offices. Thus, these stories have perpetuated the focus on the individual school as the unit of change.

In Texas, a new story is unfolding. Our ongoing study of the performance of high-poverty schools in Texas (schools in which 50% or more of the students meet free or reduced-price lunch criteria) is revealing entire school districts where such schools are achieving high academic results. Instead of finding isolated pockets of excellence (i.e., one good school in this district, another in that district, none in some districts) we have identified a few large and medium-size school districts in which a large cluster of high-poverty schools are achieving the top levels in the state accountability system. The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, in cooperation with the Cooperative Superintendency Program in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, has begun studying such districts. During the 1997-98 school year, ten Texas districts were studied in which at least one-third of the high-poverty schools achieved a Recognized or Exemplary rating in the state's accountability system.

In the Texas Public School Accountability System, schools are rated as Low-performing, Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary. The ratings are based on the percentage of students passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the rate of student attendance, and school dropout rates. In order to receive a Recognized rating in 1998, schools had to have at least 80 percent of all their students, as well as 80 percent of their African American, Hispanic, White, and low-income students, pass each section (reading, mathematics, and writing) of TAAS. Additionally, the annual dropout rate for all students, as well as for African American, Hispanic, White, and low-income students had to be less than one percent. Finally, the average daily attendance for all students had to be greater than 94 percent. The criteria for attaining an Exemplary rating were similar, except it required a 90 percent passing rate (Texas Education Agency, 1998). In 1998, relatively few high-poverty schools attained a Recognized or Exemplary rating. Only 15 percent of all Texas schools received an

Exemplary rating, while another 25 percent received a Recognized rating. Thus, the ten districts included in this study have succeeded in getting at least one-third (and in some cases all) of their high-poverty schools to achieve at a level beyond 60 percent of the schools in the state. (Texas Education Agency, A, 1998)

This study sought to determine what was happening at the level of the superintendent, the school board, and the central office to create, sustain, and support high levels of academic achievement in high-poverty schools. In the 1997-98 school year, superintendents, central office staff, and principals were interviewed; school board meetings and staff meetings were observed; and various documents and data sources were carefully reviewed to provide the descriptive information that helped generate the preliminary findings reported here. Doctoral students in the Cooperative Superintendency Program (aspiring superintendents) at the University of Texas at Austin conducted a substantial portion of the research under the leadership of senior staff in the University's College of Education and the Charles A. Dana Center. These data have been supplemented by material acquired through additional interviews of superintendents and presentations by superintendents and other leaders in the districts studied. The findings generated in this report are based on an extensive analysis of these qualitative data. We attempted to understand each individual district, but also, we conducted a cross-case analysis to identify common aspects of these districts.

The findings reported in this report share our first impressions, which we hope to refine through additional study. We plan to continue this study into the 1998-99 school year with a more intensive look at a few of the most successful school districts. Although every district was different, there were important similarities. The similarities have been grouped into three themes, Urgency, Responsibility, and Efficacy, that describe the leadership dimensions of these successful districts. Urgency conveys the conviction that the community desires and expects high academic achievement for all children. Responsibility is the commitment shared by the community and the schools to meet those high academic goals. Efficacy is the power to produce the desired effect of high academic achievement.

Theme One
Creating a Sense of Urgency in the Community

Our accountability system doesn't have anything in it to say, "Oh well, this school is in a bad neighborhood, so we shouldn't expect them to be as good as the one over there in an affluent neighborhood." We're not going to make excuses for poor kids, poor neighborhoods, single-parent families, or any of that stuff. These are the kids we've got and we expect you [the schools] to educate them all.

Houston ISD School Board Member

In the ten districts studied, district leaders created a sense of urgency for the improvement of academic achievement that was felt among both school personnel and the community at large. Superintendents and central office leaders identified, nurtured, and heightened the dreams of parents, students, teachers, and community leaders for improved academic results. They dared people to believe that their children could achieve and then led them to dare to expect such achievement in their public schools.

As an example, in Houston, the school board, superintendent, and the superintendents of the two area districts studied repeatedly voiced the conviction that all students in the district should and could pass each section of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Now, as one board member explained, "The people out on the Northeast side [one of the high-poverty areas of Houston] expect those kids to do as well as anybody in the city. And guess what? They do." She continued to explain that the Northeast Area District has one of the highest levels of family involvement in Houston, including parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Establishing Trust

If parents in these districts believed their children could achieve at dramatically higher levels, it was not simply because the new superintendent said they could. Years of academic failure and long histories of neglect by educational systems are difficult to ignore. In the absence of trust, parents might have easily dismissed such notions as hollow political promises or wishful idealism. In such settings, efforts to create a sense of urgency for change might have died early with little impact. Instead, superintendents, often with the support of other district personnel, built a high level of trust with parents and community leaders. This trust was anchored in a shared concern for the children of the community. District leaders earned trust when various

community constituencies believed that the district's primary concern was the welfare and academic achievement of their children.

These superintendents listened to the people of their communities. They built trust by showing that they cared about the ideas and concerns of parents and citizens. Trust grew substantially when people realized their concerns had been heard, understood, and addressed in policy and action.

The development of trust was a major factor in the improvement of the Beaumont Independent School District. When Carroll Thomas came in as superintendent, and as the first African American superintendent of the district, Beaumont was fragmented and divided, with little coherent support for education. Dr. Thomas devoted time and energy to listening to everyone and bringing the entire community and all its sub-communities together. The White community demanded neighborhood schools; the African-American community demanded equity in education. Dr. Thomas was able, with broad community input, to craft a district plan that all could accept. He has, in the words of one administrator, "Healed old wounds and brought different elements of the community together."

Dr. Thomas spent the early months of his tenure in Beaumont attending meetings and listening to the concerns of various citizen groups and individuals. As he explained:

> There were a lot of town hall meetings. I listened at those meetings, I really did. I spent a lot of time meeting with various groups, whether it was the teacher organizations or civic organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, retired teachers, PTA council, students, everybody who thought they wanted to have something to say. I listened to all parts of the community, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). If anybody with any kind of group had something to say about the school district, we gave them an opportunity to say it. And we took it all into consideration to see what could be done to put a program together, so they could see at least some of their thinking or feelings reflected in that program.
>
> When it was all said and done, there were about ten or twelve things on that list. Then we condensed it, and went back to say, "Here's what you are saying. You want neighborhood schools. You want magnets. There ought to be transportation to the schools." We developed a student assignment plan based on those ten or twelve things. Each one of them got a component in it. As a result, everybody could support it.

In the Ysleta District in El Paso, there were similar stories about the superintendent, Tony Trujillo, meeting with parents, civic leaders, and students.

Sometimes the meetings occurred in the living rooms of parents. Whenever and wherever possible, the superintendent sought to establish that the concerns of parents and citizens about the achievement of their students were appropriate and important to district leaders. He let everyone know that they could and should expect more from their schools and from the school district.

Additional study is needed to more clearly understand some of the nuances in the relationship-building process between superintendents and their communities; however, it is fairly clear that the process of earning this trust took different forms in different districts. In some cases, superintendents had a long history with the district and as members of the community. They had earned the trust and respect of the school community over a long period of dedicated service. In other cases, superintendents were relative newcomers to their districts and had to engage in many high-profile efforts to listen to and communicate with parents and communities. The newcomer superintendents tended to be in districts where the school board perceived that achievement was substantially lower than they deemed appropriate. Someone was brought in from the outside to bring about dramatic change. In contrast, the superintendents hired from within tended to be established leaders in the community who would maintain a tradition of steady improvement in student performance. In either case, earning the trust of parents and community leaders was essential to acquiring the community's support for bold changes.

Five of the districts studied were in South Texas. Four of the five had superintendents with a long tenure in the district and in the community, even though three of them had been superintendents for less than three years. In these districts along the Rio Grande River, separating Texas from Mexico, the student population is predominantly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged. Many of the students speak English as their second language; some arrive at school speaking no English. Some of the families live in colonias; unincorporated communities that lack basic services such as running water or electricity. These school districts, by many indicators, might be expected to be low performing, but they defy the odds and demonstrate that high poverty does not need to be an obstacle to academic achievement. Many of the current district employees have lived in these communities all or most of their lives (except for the time away at school or in the military) and are themselves products of the local schools. The experiences of these educators have shaped their commitment and dedication to the education of all children in the districts. They expressed not only a personal or professional responsibility, but also a shared responsibility with the community to educate all children, to preserve the past, and pave the way for the future.

Weslaco is an example of such a community. The current superintendent, Richard Rivera, began his teaching career there more than thirty years ago. He is regarded as a force of stability. As one principal noted, "He has roots here; he's going to stay." The community's trust has been exhibited in many ways, but perhaps, most

tangibly in the community's willingness to tax itself to support district improvement efforts. As Dr. Rivera explained:

> This community fully supported us. Usually school districts have trouble getting the community to support a bond issue. However, Weslaco is a community that will rally around these schools if they are convinced that additional moneys are needed for whatever it is. I am very proud of the people of Weslaco because they really support education, as long as they can see that the money is being used wisely. Now if they see where money is being wasted or thrown away, then it is a different story.

As Dr. Rivera urged his community to push toward levels of academic achievement found more typically in the most affluent districts of Texas, the community accepted the challenge, in part, because they trusted his leadership. They knew he was committed to serving their children well.

Using Data and Goals to Create a Sense of Urgency

Superintendents often used student achievement data and academic goals related to those data as tools for generating a sense of urgency for improvement. For instance, in the Brazosport Independent School District near Houston, the superintendent, Dr. Gerald Anderson, used data about the performance of students in a few successful classrooms to illustrate the academic potential of Hispanic, African American, and low-income students in the district. In the Mission Independent School District in South Texas, Superintendent Lupe Gonzalez used data to illustrate how attention to key academic objectives could dramatically improve student achievement. In the nearby Los Fresnos District, the superintendent, Dr. Eliseo Ruiz, used data to identify individual students who had not passed and to create a sense of immediate need to provide intensive assistance to those students. In the North Area District of Houston, the area superintendent, Erasmo Teran, contrasted student enrollment at each grade level to illustrate that even though elementary schools were showing healthy signs of improvement, there were too many students who were dropping out of school before graduation.

Superintendents and school boards often used data to highlight successful schools, successful programs, or successful teachers. District leaders consistently gave the message that there was a need for substantial improvement and excellent potential for achieving that improvement. By spotlighting successes, the explicit message was that the district valued improved academic achievement. However, the implicit message was that if this success could happen in one classroom, why not in all the classrooms at that grade level? If it could happen across one grade level, why not throughout all the grade levels at that school? If it could happen throughout a whole school, why not at all of the schools in the district? Thus, the community saw a reason

to invest its time, energy, and dollars. School board members saw a reason to follow the lead of their superintendent. Teachers and principals saw a reason to put forth the extra effort that was often necessary to bring about improved academic outcomes.

Superintendents established goals as a way of capturing the sense of urgency for improved achievement. The goals were clear enough and public enough that anyone in the district or the community could grasp what the district was attempting to accomplish. Also, the goals were challenging enough so that they generated a sense of excitement, a sense of anticipation and expectation.

Often, the districts used the Texas Public School Accountability System to frame their goals for student achievement. This system makes public the state standards for academic achievement and publishes the extent to which each school and each school district is meeting those standards. The result of this public reporting of student and school performance can be summed up by the comments of a board member in Houston:

> For the first time, people in Houston could really see where schools were compared to each other and really know how their schools were doing. And people got very upset. So there was a lot of effort at the school level to move up on the chart. I really think, more than anything else, that [the public awareness of school performance levels] has made a difference.

These successful districts used the accountability system as a tool to further academic achievement. Whereas some superintendents might attack the accountability system to defend their schools' poor performance, these superintendents have used the accountability system to acknowledge room for improvement, sometimes substantial room. As a result, the superintendent did not bear the full load of political criticism for pointing out schools in need of improvement. It was a load that was shared by the state. Furthermore, it was a load that was lessened because of the wealth of public, objective data that allowed observers to note that improvement was, in fact, needed.

In Houston, as in other successful districts, the accountability system enabled the board, the community, and the administrators at all levels to make their expectations of achievement clear. This culture of accountability started with the expectations of the board:

> Our accountability system doesn't have anything in it to say, "Oh well, this school is in a bad neighborhood, so we shouldn't expect them to be as good as the one over there in an affluent neighborhood." We're not going to make excuses for poor kids, poor neighborhoods, single parent families, or any of that stuff. These are the kids we've got and we expect you [the schools] to educate them all.

Many superintendents focused on the goal of achieving the Recognized or Exemplary ratings that once were attained only by very small or very affluent districts. When district leaders talked about becoming a Recognized District, everyone knew that achieving such an ambitious goal would require substantial improvement. Teachers knew that it would necessitate helping individual students and groups of students achieve at higher levels than ever before. Principals knew that such a goal would require them to work diligently to improve the quality of instruction in some classrooms. Parents and community members knew that such goals would promise a higher likelihood that every student would meet grade level academic expectations. Everyone knew how far they had to go to achieve the goal and they knew that success or the lack of success would be clearly visible to the entire school community.

Neither these districts nor their schools seemed satisfied with attaining an Acceptable rating. All were aiming for and most have achieved Recognized or Exemplary status. A central office staff member in Laredo explained their commitment to achieving the higher rating, "I feel we are definitely a very progressive district that holds very high expectations for everyone, beginning with our superintendent. I know that she holds very high expectations for all of us, but we see that throughout every level, from custodian on up."

Even though the Texas Public School Accountability System provided a frame for many of the district goals, several of the districts have gone beyond state expectations in establishing goals. For example, the Ysleta Independent School District established the goal: "All students who enroll in our schools will graduate fluently bilingual and prepared to enter a four-year college or university." This goal required Ysleta schools to ensure that their students not only passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), but also required that they attain fluency in at least two languages, and master higher level courses that prepared them for success in college.

As superintendents worked with their school boards and communities to establish goals, it is important to note that the goals were not merely the topic of one night's school board meeting. The goals were not simply a footnote on the district's stationery. The goals had meaning for teachers, students, parents, principals, and business leaders. The goals caught the imagination of the entire school community and sparked creative action.

As an example, in the North Area District of Houston, several elementary schools had improved academic achievement, but there was still substantial concern about dropout rates and graduation rates. The district could have crafted a vague goal that talked about reducing the percentage of dropouts or increasing the graduates. Instead, the district framed the goal as "1000 graduates." It was noted that each year, 1000 students entered the district as kindergarten students; however, the class diminished as the years went by, particularly after eighth grade. Thus, the goal "1000 graduates" was a clear, objective, and powerful way of stating the goal of keeping every student in school until graduation. "1000 graduates" was a rallying cry that kept

the entire district focused on keeping every student in school and providing a quality of instruction that would lead all students to graduation.

Part of the power of the goals was that district leaders made the goals nonnegotiable. The goals were articulated in a way that applied to all students and excuses were not accepted. For instance, the Brazosport superintendent, Gerald Anderson, did not suggest that the goal would be satisfied if all but the Hispanic students passed the state assessment. Nor did the Ysleta superintendent, Tony Trujillo, suggest that the goal would be achieved if all but those students who posed discipline problems graduated, fluently bilingual, and ready to enter the college of their choice. "All" meant all, even those students attending alternative high schools. The failures of the past did not limit the vision for the future. Thus, the goals became causes that fueled the energies of school personnel, parents, board members, and students.

Maintaining the Relationship between Superintendent and School Board

The relationship between the superintendent and the school board was a crucial testing point for the development of trust within the community. For most of the ten districts, dramatic growth in student achievement seemed to coincide with periods when there was a high level of trust between the superintendent and the school board. When and where there was a high level of trust, the superintendent was comfortable with the parameters and direction set by the school board and the board was comfortable with the superintendent's ability to manage and lead the school district. In most of the districts, that high level of trust existed in 1998, at the time of data collection. However, there were situations in which this trust had eroded, thus jeopardizing the momentum of academic improvement efforts. Improvement was more likely to occur when the school board trusted that the superintendent 1) had a vision of improved academic achievement that included the children and families board members represented; and 2) had the knowledge and skills necessary to make the vision a reality. As Bob Moore, the superintendent in Amarillo, explained:

> I truly believe that where the focus of the organization is on student learning, that [greatly improved achievement] cannot occur unless you have a school board that has total trust and confidence in all of its employees. You've got to have a school board that is focused on student learning. They cannot micro-manage. The system would crash overnight if the school board did not have trust and confidence, not only in me as superintendent, but in the rest of the staff, the teachers, and the principals, that they are going to do what's best.

As a result of this trust, school boards were willing to allow district leaders to develop and implement programs, make key personnel changes, and start new

initiatives that otherwise would never have happened. A board member in Brazosport explained:

> Our board sets goals that every child in this district will be at grade level in reading by third grade and maintain that throughout their schooling. That is one of our goals. We say, 'O.K. Superintendent, that's our goal, here are the resources to make that happen.' We don't tell him how to do it.

In Houston, there was a special relationship between the school board and the superintendent that reflected a high degree of mutual trust and respect. In 1989, three citizens in Houston decided that the school board was out of touch with urban education, ran for election, and were elected to the board. This group of three, with one sitting member, became a voting bloc that reshaped the district's vision, accountability, governance, and culture. Prior to 1989, the board often split along racial lines, but the last ten years have seen the board's actions directed toward the attainment of academic goals for all students. This commitment is demonstrated by a member of the board who says, "We didn't get on the board to spend our travel budgets at conferences. We came to make a difference." After two short and unsuccessful tenures with other superintendents, the board realized that it needed someone who clearly shared its vision. The board hired one of its own trustees, Rod Paige, to be superintendent.

The development and maintenance of a sense of urgency requires ongoing attention. Several of the superintendents stressed the continued importance of going out to the community, listening to parents, taxpayers, and various citizen groups. They spent a considerable amount of time sharing data about progress and setbacks, achievements and disappointments. They nurtured the relationship with their communities and their school boards by openly sharing data, listening to concerns, and articulating a vision that renewed hope, rewarded effort, and inspired a passion for continuous improvement.

Unfortunately, not every superintendent was able to sustain this trust as school board members left and new ones arrived. Thus, two of the superintendents studied are no longer in the districts they helped to improve. We do not see this as a repudiation, but rather as an affirmation of the importance of the development and maintenance of a high level of trust for improved achievement. It also underscores that although it is relatively easy to describe in this text, it is far more difficult to achieve and sustain.

Theme Two
Sharing Responsibility for Academic Achievement

> *You know that if you are not successful, you're not going to be there for a long time. And they [central office leaders] were very fair. They said, "You have three years to bring up performance." Three years is a long time.*
>
> *Principal in Ysleta ISD*

Leaders in these districts did not simply build a sense of urgency in the community and then allow business to continue; they focused everyone's attention and energy on academic goals. The superintendency became a lens that brought together the energy and resources of each school and focused it precisely on the task of improving academic achievement in a way that led everyone to understand their responsibility for influencing change. Superintendents and other central office leaders kept schools focused on district goals by keeping expectations for principals clear, insisting that principals develop believable, workable plans, reducing distractions, keeping relevant data about academic progress visible and public, and carefully balancing flexibility and accountability.

From Goals to Clear Expectations for Principals

One powerful way in which superintendents focused energy on the attainment of academic goals was by making expectations and priorities clear to personnel. In these districts, administrators at all levels knew that they were expected to influence the attainment of the district's academic goals. Administrators knew that the future of their employment with the district would be influenced largely by the extent to which student achievement increased, as measured by the state assessment and by other variables. In Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, one principal explained, "The first day he [the superintendent] walked in, he told us what he expected of us and how he wanted us to do it." A central office administrator in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo elaborated on their method of a personnel appraisal:

> We developed a performance-based appraisal system with principals last year. This year we just finalized the instrument for facilitators and assistant principals. We are moving to where everybody is appraised based on performance. Principals understand that their effectiveness is based on results.

In Ysleta and Houston, most administrators had one-year contracts. In Los Fresnos, principals had seen other principals lose their jobs because of a lack of improvement in academic achievement. In Mission, even though no one remembered the last time a principal had been fired, everyone was clear that the superintendent held very high, clear expectations for improved academic achievement. Administrators in all of these districts did not need to guess about what was going to influence their evaluation, job continuation, or promotion. It was clear, concrete, objective, and tied directly to student achievement.

The regular presence and visibility of superintendents in schools reinforced clear expectations for academic achievement. Explained one principal in Beaumont, "He [the superintendent] visits more than any other superintendent I have ever worked under. He gets out to the campus, and you never know when he's coming, which is good." Superintendents and other central office leaders in these successful districts spent time regularly (often weekly) visiting schools. These visits provided opportunities to acknowledge positive efforts and reinforce attention to issues of instruction.

Similarly, expectations were made clear in the conversations between superintendents and principals. Whether in group meetings or in one-on-one conversations with principals, superintendents used interactions to reinforce expectations and to keep principals focused on academic goals. As expressed by Erasmo Teran, Superintendent of the North District of Houston, "My job is to always go back and ask, 'Where are you? What are you doing? Where will you be?'" In these districts, principals knew what was important to their superintendents. The conversation always centered on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Perhaps the best evidence that clear expectations were communicated was in the manner in which those expectations were understood and articulated by principals. A principal in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo stated:

> First of all, I think the district wants us to have good leadership and care for our schools. I don't think we can be good leaders unless we care: care for the children, and care for the staff. We must be willing to sacrifice a little bit for them. They [district leaders] are expecting us to be good leaders, be positive role models, and get good TAAS scores. Both the state and the community expect us to produce students who will become good citizens in society.

Another principal in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo described himself, "I am the type of person -- you give me a paycheck and I am going to give you the product. The product is an increase in student results. I take that seriously and I am trying to instill that in my teachers."

In these effective districts, academic improvement was not accidental, nor was it dependent upon good luck; it was planned. Planning was not a process of re-telling existing programs, nor was it an exercise in compliance. Schools were expected to generate plans that had a high likelihood of leading to the attainment of district goals. Generally, schools had substantial latitude in developing plans. When needed, they also received considerable support from the central office. However, principals were accountable for leading planning efforts that would make a difference in student achievement.

Data became fuel for planning, in the same ways that data fueled the sense of urgency for change in communities. In these districts, schools used data to assess their strengths and needs. They also used data in weighing the value of alternative courses of action. When central office personnel asked, "Why did you select this approach?" school personnel were expected to be able to respond with answers grounded in data.

Those with responsibility for implementing plans had a substantial role in developing them. In the districts studied, principals tended to involve the whole staff in developing a vision for accomplishing the challenging goals and creating a practical plan to achieve those goals. A principal in Mission related, "The expectations are that you need to work with your staff members in a collaborative manner so that everything that is happening on your campus is a shared vision and not just the principal's, but something that is coming from your staff members as well." In describing the planning process they follow with schools, a central office administrator in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo says, "We involve everybody. We involve the paraprofessionals, the teachers, custodial staff, [and] students. We do surveys to identify areas of need and weaknesses, then start working on our campus improvement plan and address those areas of concern."

The state-required district and campus improvement plans are not just bureaucratic requirements that are met once a year and forgotten, nor is planning an activity undertaken by a select few. Relating what she has observed in campus planning, a federal programs director in Laredo stated:

> Schools are getting together, together, together. It is no longer "me, myself, and I." It is all of us. I think it is that bonding that has taken place among faculty, because everything is so research based. The driving forces behind the campus improvement plan are rooted in data, statistics that are very evident for everybody to see.

From Planning to Implementation

Erasmo Teran, the superintendent in the North Area of Houston, quoted the general superintendent, Rod Paige, by explaining that Dr. Paige reminded principals, "It's not what you expect . . . It's what you inspect." Although the superintendents and their central office teams were passionate about assuring the success of every child, they were dispassionate in their use of objective data. In the districts studied, superintendents and central office personnel regularly discussed data to keep teachers and administrators focused on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Instructional strengths and needs were revealed through a variety of data that were carefully analyzed and interpreted. This analysis of data was an ongoing process throughout the year. Data were disaggregated in many ways to identify learning objectives that required more intensive instruction. The executive director of one of the clusters in Amarillo explained:

> Our job is to give them [the schools] the data so they can make decisions. This is what we do for our cluster. [We help them see the levels of performance of different groups of students.] For example, these are their African American students and these are their Hispanic students. We break it down by campus, cluster, and district-wide, and we disaggregate the data in different ways.

For schools in the Brazosport School District, data analysis is the first step of their eight-step teaching process. Achievement data were carefully disaggregated and provided to teachers so they know the specific academic strengths and needs of students. The Director of Instruction related:

> The first step is simply that we disaggregate the data. We get all our data in June and disaggregate all of the data by student. We get the teacher rosters from the principals for the following school year and we prepare that data for each teacher during the summer and put it in a folder so they've got exactly which objectives were mastered and which objectives were not mastered by each student. So, the first day of school, teachers know exactly what their students know and don't know. In the past, as a teacher, I know it would take me at least six weeks to figure out where my kids were.

In the Mission school district, the superintendent spent considerable time reviewing data, analyzing data, and presenting data to educators. Focus was directed to TAAS data, as well as to SAT and ACT college entrance examinations, end-of-course examinations in algebra and biology, and other assessments developed by the district. In Mission, teachers and principals, with the support and leadership of central office personnel, developed a set of benchmarks to gauge the progress of students through the school year. The benchmark assessments provided teachers and principals a way of determining that students were on a proper trajectory to learn all of the skills required

by the state assessment system. The use of these benchmarks helped keep everyone in the district focused on actualizing the district motto: Success for every student.

In the Northeast Area of Houston, principals are given substantial data about student achievement and then they are expected to use the data to develop strategies for improving teaching and learning. Then, students take six-week assessments that include items from special test-bank software, released TAAS items, and other criterion-referenced assessments that address state standards. Schools are expected to use data from these assessments to gauge progress, refine plans and programs, and make mid-course corrections. Finally, when principals are evaluated, student achievement data are at the core of the discussion. As Dr. Hebert, the area superintendent explained, "if others did this [performed this well], . . . and you're at the bottom of the chart, . . . when your [evaluation] comes up, you can only be below expectations . . ."

As the plans are implemented, data are used to determine how the plans need to be adjusted. Sometimes a determination is made that additional data are needed, and the central office teams help to develop assessment instruments to acquire the needed data. In Brazosport, short assessments were developed for teachers to administer after each instructional focus unit. Data are then entered on a spreadsheet after each unit so teachers know each student's mastery level throughout the school year. In Los Fresnos, a process collaboratively developed by the central office and teachers used timelines for teaching objectives and benchmark tests for formative assessments. This provided the teachers with the information they needed to adjust their plans. This process of data analysis has affected the tutoring that is provided to students. As a central office team member described, "Tutoring is no longer a haphazard kind of thing. Now tutoring is very deliberate. We know exactly what we need to teach the kids in tutoring."

Reducing Distractions

Another way superintendents increased the focus on student achievement was by reducing distractions that would otherwise divert the energy of principals and teachers. In some districts, this was achieved by structuring activities so principals could spend minimum amounts of time away from their campuses during the school day and spend the maximum portion of each day focused on instruction. In most of the districts, the superintendents removed distractions by reducing the extent to which central office staff played rule-monitoring roles. With less central office dictates, principals and teachers had more time to address instructional improvement. Similarly, superintendents required that central office personnel work in ways that reduced many of the bureaucratic or auxiliary functions that tended to divert the attention of school personnel away from teaching and learning.

For instance, in Weslaco, the superintendent held meetings with principals on a weekly basis, but the meetings were held after school. Principals were expected to be at their schools during the school day. Also, the superintendent tried to minimize the paperwork and memos sent to principals. He wanted to be sure that principals had the time necessary to influence teaching and learning.

In Amarillo, a reduction of distractions was achieved by getting central office personnel to think differently about their jobs. The superintendent impressed upon all central office staff the notion that their primary responsibility was to support improved achievement at each of the district's schools. For many central office people, this meant that their job was to handle things that could be distractions, so that principals and teachers did not need to do so. Part of the evaluation of central office personnel was based on the extent to which they met the needs of principals and teachers. Maintenance staff, curriculum, food service, human resources, transportation, and staff of other departments were told that their primary responsibility was to support schools. Thus, principals were more likely to spend less time dealing with non-instructional issues.

Superintendents in these districts insisted that principals have the opportunity to focus on improving teaching and learning in their schools. Central office staff worked with principals to identify and resolve issues that detracted from the ability of principals to focus on instructional improvement. As Dr. Ruiz, superintendent in Los Fresnos, explained, "We need to have the principals and the assistants focused on instruction and not deal too much with non-instructional issues. That's what we were trying to get across."

Balancing Flexibility and Accountability

At first glance, an observer of these ten school districts might assume that the superintendents were autocratic and dictatorial, because certainly there were cautionary stories, such as the reconstitution of Bellaire High School in Ysleta. Also, there were many situations in which there was an explicit or implied threat of termination or reassignment if expected results were not achieved. Yet, another set of observations of these same districts could easily yield a very different picture. Many principals talked about the flexibility and autonomy they enjoyed. They praised their superintendents for allowing them the freedom to do what they perceived as important at their campuses. The truth is that both sets of observations tell important sides of the same story. In these districts, superintendents negotiated a careful balance between flexibility and accountability. This negotiation was part of the strategy used to focus attention and energy on improving instruction.

School personnel, from superintendents and principals to bus drivers and cafeteria workers, were held accountable for results. For most personnel, the results

expected were specific improvements in student achievement. If they made acceptable progress toward the attainment of those results, they enjoyed considerable autonomy. Flexibility was provided around issues that matter. Schools controlled much more than decisions about the cafeteria schedule and how money from the Coke machine would be spent. Often, principals had complete authority over programs, personnel, budget, and professional development. Discussing the relationship between accountability for results and the autonomy to make decisions, the superintendent in Ysleta succinctly observed, "Accountability without latitude is cruelty."

Principals and school leadership teams in the districts studied had wide latitude to determine how they would reach district goals for student achievement. In these districts, site-based decision-making was implemented in a way that meant that the goals established by the district for the achievement of students were not negotiable. Excuses for failure to achieve the goals were not accepted. However, principals, teachers, and school leadership teams had considerable autonomy in determining how they would use fiscal, personnel, curricular, and instructional resources in order to attain the district goals, as long as progress was evidenced. A central office administrator in Laredo stated:

> We know each campus has its unique needs. I think that site-based decision-making has been viewed as something very positive, very favorable for improving student achievement, for really having everyone actively involved with what's happening at a given campus. Our district definitely views it [site-based decision-making] as a very positive thing.

The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo superintendent explained how he supported site-based decision-making in a way that increased the sense of responsibility of school personnel:

> I allow them to think, to make decisions. I give them freedom to do their work. I don't look over their shoulders. Certainly they know what my expectations are; that they should keep me informed and let me know how things are moving along. I want to impress on them how important it is for me that learning takes place in their schools, and that teachers are on task and that there is a lot of caring in that school.

In these effective districts, the message from the central office to campus principals could be summed up as, "We expect you to be successful. How you do it is up to you. If you are successful, you will be free to continue doing whatever you are doing that works. If you are not being successful, the resources of the district are available to you, and you had better use them."

The higher the achievement in the schools, the wider the latitude became. Support for competence is encapsulated in a Houston board member's comment about exemplary schools: "If a school is exemplary, it is the will of the board to have them

left alone. That's the kind of deal I felt like I cut. You go out and work your tail off, and do the best you can to make this an exemplary school, and, in return, it's yours." As explained by a central office administrator in Houston, exemplary schools do not need assistance. Instead, the district is focused on assisting the schools that are low performing or acceptable. The district is there to provide support if needed. And they don't wait to be called on. This district office administrator described how the district superintendent might say to a principal; "My people are coming to your school. They are coming to assist you. If they come out and you don't want their assistance, just say so, but remember, you are held accountable for everything that happens on your campus."

Just as there was real flexibility in decisions regarding budget, personnel, school organization, and instruction, there was also real accountability for results. A principal in Ysleta explained, "You know that if you are not successful, you're not going to be there for a long time. And they [central office leaders] were very fair. They said, 'You have three years to bring up performance.' Three years is a long time."

Tony Trujillo, superintendent of the Ysleta district stated, "My job is to get ordinary people to do extraordinary things." All of these superintendents balanced flexibility and accountability as a way to get people to do extraordinary things. Many principals and teachers saw the combination of autonomy and responsibility as professionally challenging and empowering. They saw within the balance opportunities to reflect upon their practice, try new approaches, and learn from their mistakes. Principals in several of the districts reported that, for the first time in their careers, they felt that they had the license to do what they believed needed to be done, as long as they were willing to be accountable for the results. As one principal in the Ysleta district explained, "I have sincerely seen people who were professionally dead come alive. I have seen them grow and become pro-active and eager to go to work everyday and share ideas. They were not like that five years ago. Not at all."

Theme Three
Building Efficacy: Aligning Resources and Structuring Support

It is not just a matter of changing the organizational structure and the organizational chart. It is much, much more than that. It is really a change in culture. It's a way of thinking. It's a way of doing business. It's the mindset of everybody working together.
Bob Moore, Amarillo ISD Superintendent

Efficacy is defined as the power to produce a desired effect (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982). In the districts studied, leaders helped teachers, principals, and other school personnel feel like they had the power to produce desired student achievement goals. These district leaders made available such a high level of knowledge, skills, resources, and support that educators felt efficacious, even in the face of challenging academic goals. The energies and resources of the districts were aligned to build the capacity of teachers to bring their students to the high levels of achievement demanded by district goals. A member of the Houston ISD Board of Trustees articulated this:

> All kids can learn. The most important relationship is between teacher and student. The central office should be here to support schools, not to control. Just that sense of direction and that sense of focus have been important in moving us forward.

These districts did not simply insist upon school accountability and wait to see who was successful and who was not. They actively sought to build the knowledge and skills of principals, teachers, and support personnel so that they had a higher likelihood of meeting expectations. By increasing access to useful information, district leaders helped principals and teachers feel like they could improve academic results for all populations of students. To create this sense of efficacy, most of these districts reorganized the provision of services from the district office.

Changing the Role of the District Office

Central offices were reorganized with an emphasis on supporting instructional improvement. Often this meant the decentralization of functions closer to or on campuses. Central office personnel were more likely to assume support functions and less likely to assume compliance monitoring functions. They were more likely to help schools find answers and less likely to provide directives. They were more focused on instruction in classrooms and less focused on administrative procedures. They were

more likely to spend time helping principals and school decision-making committees use data to make decisions that would result in improved academic results and less likely to spend time approving expenditures, programs, and practices.

A different relationship has emerged between schools and central office personnel in the districts studied. Central office personnel were more likely to perceive that their primary role was to support schools. Principals and teachers were more likely to perceive central office personnel as people who provided useful assistance. This change in relationships was reflected in the comments of the budget manager in the Laredo school district:

> We improved the lines of communication. I think that's very key. Let's say you have a site-based decision-making committee and they have a question about finance or about a code. They want to know, "Can we do this or can we not do that?" In the past they used to shy away from asking those types of questions. Now they call us and they invite us to their campus and we go and make presentations there. We present them our guidelines and we suggest, "This is what you need to do, this is what you can do, or what you shouldn't do." We are trying to provide them with support.

In the districts studied, central office personnel were less likely to be perceived as "people who work downtown, who don't know what schools really need, and who push rules, requirements, and paper," and were more likely to be perceived as knowledgeable resources who were easily approachable and accessible. A central office staff member in Weslaco related, "It is expected that we will be on the campuses. It is expected that we will keep abreast in our subject area. I really feel like the quality and the level of professionalism has strengthened in the last three years."

In Amarillo, the superintendent has restructured the district by reorganizing into cluster teams, flattening the organization, and sending support services to the campuses. As explained by an assistant superintendent:

> We did away with the subject area coordinators and created learning facilitators. Those are teams of people who will sort of be a fire hydrant. They will go where the cluster director needs them to go, or do some research on a program that can be implemented. They are very much generalists and the learning facilitator concept is true in its meaning—they are to facilitate learning.

Bob Moore, Amarillo Superintendent, cautioned that it takes much more than reorganization, however. He pointed out that the focus must be on how to build the capacity of schools to improve student achievement:

> It is not just a matter of changing the organizational structure and the

> organizational chart. It is much, much more than that. It is really a change in culture. It's a way of thinking. It's a way of doing business. It's the mindset of everybody working together.

Although there was a strong emphasis on site-based decision-making, central office personnel did not wash their hands of responsibility for improving instruction. Central office leaders worked to build the capacity of school personnel to use their decision-making authority well. Central office teams were constantly in the schools, assisting the school personnel in identifying the roots of problems and then working to support agreed-upon solutions.

The central office teams had high expectations of the schools and also of themselves. Although the methods used to build the capacity of schools were wide-ranging, creative, and site-specific, all of the districts studied changed their central office role from one of monitoring for compliance to one of supporting change in schools. Regularly, principals heard central office personnel asking, "What do you need?" and "How can we help?" Often, principals knew that they had the support they needed in order to make substantial improvements in academic achievement.

Creating Structures to Support the Learning of Educators

In the districts studied, leaders understood that they were not going to achieve dramatic changes in academic results unless classroom instruction improved. Thus, they created structures to help educators teach "smarter" and continuously learn from their own practice and from the practice of others. This emphasis on improved instructional practices, coupled with site-based decision-making, has brought about the reorganization of the central offices to provide more day-to-day support to teachers. In order to support teachers, central office leaders worked intensively with principals and other instructional leaders to identify the professional development needs of individual teachers and groups of teachers at each school. However, identified needs were not addressed with the same models of professional development used a decade ago. As an assistant superintendent in Amarillo ISD described:

> The old staff development department was centralized and said at the outset, "Our teachers need these things, our principals need these things." So they organized and provided programs. Some of them were good, some not so good. We had a good group of people doing staff development. But the decision of what schools needed was made at the central office. That doesn't work. It needs to be on the campus.

This new conceptualization of professional development required that teachers be provided many opportunities to meet together to analyze data, to plan, to examine and adjust the curriculum, to reflect upon their own instructional practices, and to

examine and discuss student work. Professional development was pursued daily as teachers sought to learn from their own practice, it was no longer a commodity delivered a few times a year as something separate from the act of teaching students. A Weslaco central office administrator described a district initiative to support vertical and horizontal teams. The district provided the time for teachers to meet in teams regularly to discuss instructional objectives and to learn effective teaching strategies from each other. Thus, there was articulation across grade levels. Middle school teachers knew what they needed to teach to ensure that students were ready for the challenging curriculum they would receive at high school. Elementary school teachers knew what they needed to do to prepare students for middle school. Across schools with similar grade levels, teachers and principals were able to share effective strategies and learn from each other's successes.

In the districts studied, much of the professional development occurred in classrooms during the school day. In several of the districts, it was common for schools to have instructional specialists, facilitators, or resource persons who helped provide instructional leadership. Often, these leaders observed teachers, helped teachers understand and use data, and facilitated a process of pedagogical problem-solving in which they worked in partnership with teachers to identify and solve problems related to the achievement of groups of students. Often, these instructional leaders modeled lessons or instructional strategies. A facilitator in Brazosport described their district's approach to professional development that is based in the classroom and designed to improve instructional practices as well as change the expectations for student achievement:

> You hear people say, "My kids are unable to do that." Yes they are [able]. And you have to actually go into the classrooms and teach the lessons yourself. I've been in one classroom for two weeks straight and then the students took that assessment and they passed it and she [the teacher] was amazed. She was a believer, and now, I get to go back. You've just got to have high expectations. You can't make excuses for them and you can't accept excuses from them.

As instructional issues were identified, often district leaders first looked within the district for solutions; teachers who had been successful were recognized and featured as the experts. A central office administrator in Los Fresnos was adamant that the academic turnaround in the district was a product of taking isolated practices that were effective and duplicating the practices district-wide. "Really, the change that has taken place is that the successful strategies and initiatives that were happening at one or two campuses have now become district-wide." In describing a Los Fresnos program called "Teachers Teaching Teachers," a central office staff member stated, "The sharing was wonderful. You could hear teachers from different schools saying, 'you know, I do it this way' and they would share their idea, and another teacher would pick it up. So they left [the session] with a much broader base than when they came."

A few years prior, in Brazosport, many teachers in high-poverty schools had very limited success in getting their students to master the skills measured by the TAAS. The superintendent, Dr. Anderson, explained the process they followed to identify instructional practices that were more likely to work:

> We researched our individual teacher performance data with the goal of finding those teachers that were doing an outstanding job of teaching low socio-economic kids. We did [find outstanding successes]. We found teachers that were having phenomenal success—95 percent to 100 percent mastery.

Once these teachers were identified, the Brazosport central office staff worked with the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the broad strategies used by those teachers to successfully teach their students. This led to the development of an eight-step strategy that became a central part of the professional development effort in Brazosport. A member of the central office team in Brazosport described how her professional development experience, based on the practice of these successful Brazosport teachers, changed her expectations for students and her concept of her ability to teach them.

> When I came here ten years ago, I was put in first grade, and I was met at the door by the other first grade teachers saying, "Well, just do the best you can. These are poor kids and you won't get much out of them." So we gave the Iowa [Test of Basic Skills] and there were terrible results, and everyone said, "Oh well, that's the best you can expect, don't worry about it." So that was my attitude, that's what I was told. So while I thought I was a good teacher, I didn't realize how bad I was. Now that I'm doing this [instructional] process, I feel like I need to go back to every one of those kids and say, "I'm so sorry!"

The districts studied were continually looking for opportunities to learn from the success of others. They did not, however, fall into the trap of thinking that simply adopting a program that was successful somewhere else would result in the achievement of their goals. Instead, they carefully examined the current research, constantly questioned experts, and continually searched for promising practices. Districts often promoted opportunities for teachers and principals to visit and learn from other successful schools. Often district leaders made sure that school personnel had access to information made available from education service centers, universities, and other technical assistance providers.

These district offices actively supported schools in improving classroom instruction. District leaders provided (or provided access to) expertise, research assistance, and professional development opportunities, but the decisions about curriculum, instructional practice, and school organization clearly belonged to the schools (as long as expected gains in achievement were being made). A central office

administrator in Mission explained that if a campus did not perform well on the TAAS, the district sent consultants to the campus to determine the reason(s) for that performance.

The central office staff continuously asked, "What can we do to provide the support the campuses are going to need?" Central office staff (many of whom were formerly principals) recognized the need for principals and teachers to assume ownership of their programs. The focus was on providing support, not dictating.

Providing Resources to Support Improvement Plans

School personnel felt like they had the power to effect changes in the academic achievement of their students because they perceived that they had sufficient resources and enough latitude to use those resources in ways that allowed them to implement their improvement plans.

In the districts studied, superintendents focused their limited resources on instruction. In Amarillo, the superintendent and the school board worked to increase the percentage of district funds dedicated to classroom instruction. Considerable attention was given to the twin goals of efficiency and effectiveness. As limited resources were carefully allocated, highest priority was given to expenses directly related to the provision of instruction. Often, other expenditures were cut. In Laredo, there was a similar emphasis on focusing resources on instruction. A board member in Laredo explained that all budgetary requests related to curriculum and instruction were funded with no cuts. "The message we sent was that curriculum was now number one."

District leaders recognized that the kinds of intensive interventions needed to bring all students to the achievement of the challenging goals sometimes required extra resources. The districts eliminated administrative positions and reorganized to provide more funds for instructional purposes. They were creative in using existing resources and in finding additional resources to provide what was needed. The superintendent of Brazosport ISD explained:

> There's no question that it takes additional resources for those campuses that have significant numbers of economically disadvantaged kids. We're probably going to have somewhat lower pupil-teacher ratios on those campuses. We're also probably going to have a great deal more extended day and extended year kinds of things. We have to do what we can do with the kids while we have them at the school house door. So there's no question that I probably provide more resources to economically disadvantaged campuses.

Making sufficient resources available was only a part of the equation. Additionally, superintendents gave schools flexibility to use their resources in ways that would support the implementation of improvement plans. Superintendents and their central office teams supported the schools by taking advantage of the increased flexibility offered by Title I Schoolwide programs, assisting the schools with planning to become schoolwide, and adjusting central office policies and procedures to maximize the flexibility. Central office leaders actively encouraged schools to use the opportunities created by federal and state laws to coordinate all of their resources in order to address student needs.

In some districts, schools were also supported in identifying those regulations that created barriers to implementing improvement plans and achieving goals. Central-office personnel assisted the schools by applying for waivers related to those regulations. In these districts, the primary role of state and federal program leaders changed from telling schools, "No, you can't do that," to one in which they used their knowledge of regulations to suggest, "Here's how you can use these funds to support the implementation of your improvement plan."

In these districts, principals and school leadership teams controlled substantial school budgets. Principals had a major role in the budget process. For instance, a principal in Laredo described, "The budget process has been changed drastically. [We now have] involvement in all of the [budget] process." Principals had the flexibility to modify budgets quickly in response to student achievement data. District budget leaders were quick to respond to requests for information and assistance with budget. They were creative in finding ways to support schools, and eliminate fiscal barriers that could stand in the way of accomplishing goals.

Through site-based decision-making and budgeting processes, principals controlled the personnel hired on their campuses. Schools used this flexibility to respond to the needs identified through planning processes. In many of the Title I schools, principals decreased the number of instructional aides and increased the availability of highly trained, instructional leaders. Also, many of the schools used their resources to pay teachers to provide after-school tutoring, Saturday schools, or other extensions of school time.

Supporting Schools in Making Research-Based, Data-Driven Decisions

School personnel in the districts studied often felt efficacious about their work because of their ability to use research and data to guide decision-making. School district leaders provided principals, school leadership teams, and teachers with various tools for collecting, analyzing, and understanding data about student achievement. Also, they provided (or provided access to) comprehensive training in the use of those data tools so that school personnel would make high quality decisions.

Several of the districts provided schools with tools for assessing the extent to which students were mastering academic standards throughout the school year. In some of the districts, teachers, under the leadership of central office personnel, developed these assessments. Some districts used released versions of previously used TAAS examinations. Others used commercially prepared benchmark assessments. Teachers in these districts did not need to guess about how their students would perform on the TAAS examination at the end of the year. Data from benchmark assessments were provided promptly to teachers and principals. The data were aggregated and disaggregated in various ways to identify both strengths and areas of need.

In the districts studied, central office leaders spent considerable time assisting school staffs in understanding, and using assessment data for decision-making. In the Mission school district, the superintendent, Lupe Gonzalez, made the analysis of disaggregated data a top priority. He recalled his years as a teacher: "I had never heard of data disaggregation, but I was doing it." His success in analyzing and using data led to his promotion to a central office position where he performed such analyses for all campuses. Now, as superintendent, he continues to ensure that schools are provided with high quality support in understanding and using data for the improvement of instruction.

As well, central office staff often provided teachers and principals access to research or programs and practices that research had proven effective. A central office staff person in Weslaco explained how she interacted with teachers:

> I am a firm believer that if you are asking teachers to do something, they need to understand why you are asking them to do that. You are never going to have buy-in if they don't understand. So, anytime I go in to do a staff development with teachers or facilitators, I begin by saying, "This is what the research shows. This is where we are."
>
> Another way I see my role is as sort of a screener, and I don't mean that in a negative sense. I don't want to make everyone think the same way that I think, but there is so much out there in the way of educational materials, and teachers, if we allowed it, would be so bombarded with advertising, that I try to look at what the representatives are bringing in and screen out the fluff or the things that I think appear to be fluff or gimmicks, as opposed to the more legitimate and worthwhile programs or books or materials.

The focus was on helping school personnel make better decisions through the use of data and research. Central office personnel built the capacity of teachers, principals, and other school leaders to understand the specific learning strengths and

needs of their students and to respond with programs, practices, and policies that had a high likelihood of generating improved achievement.

Summary

These ten districts have shown how school districts can create environments in which all schools, even schools serving very poor communities, generate high levels of student achievement. These success-breeding environments were not created overnight. They were the result of careful, diligent, and passionate efforts of superintendents, school boards, and central office leaders.

First, district leaders created in their communities a sense of urgency for the improvement of academic achievement. Superintendents and other key district leaders listened to parents, business leaders, principals, and teachers. They learned about the community's desires and dreams for their schools and their children. They then used this information, in concert with data about the achievement of students, to create a higher level of expectation for student academic achievement. They created a sense of excitement by putting forward challenging goals and rallying everyone to work toward the attainment of those goals.

Secondly, the district leaders created an environment in which improving academic instruction became a responsibility shared by everyone at every school. Principals knew they were expected to provide a quality of instructional leadership that would lead to the attainment of specific academic goals. Expectations were clear. Principals, with district support, developed effective plans for meeting those expectations. However, those plans were not mere file cabinet stuffers. Both central office and campus leaders continuously monitored the progress of instructional improvements through the use of student achievement data. Progress was not accidental. It was anticipated, planned, monitored, and celebrated. To facilitate the achievement of academic goals, superintendents worked to minimize the distractions that might divert attention away from instruction, and they carefully negotiated a balance between flexibility and accountability.

Finally, district leaders recognized that high expectations needed to be accompanied by high quality support. They provided a quantity and quality of support that helped school personnel feel that they had the power to effect measurable changes in the achievement of students. Thus, a variety of support structures were developed to increase the capacity of schools to address instructional improvement issues. In part, this was done through changing the role of the district office. Central office personnel were less likely to spend time monitoring and controlling processes and more likely to find ways to support and provide assistance to schools. District leaders created structures that gave school personnel opportunities to learn both from their own work and from the work of other educators. These structures helped create a culture of continuous professional development and improvement, with an emphasis on data-driven, research-based, decision-making. Central office leaders provided

schools access to sufficient resources to implement their improvement plans and also provided strong support in the use of data and research so that school leaders could use those resources well.

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